

**CLARIFYING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FRAMING AND  
IDEOLOGY IN THE STUDY OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS:  
A COMMENT ON OLIVER AND JOHNSTON\***

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **CLARIFYING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FRAMING AND IDEOLOGY IN THE STUDY OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS: A COMMENT ON OLIVER AND JOHNSTON**

In this comment on Oliver and Johnston's exposition on frames and ideologies in social movement research, we concur that frames and ideology are not different words for the same thing but are, in fact, different entities; that both concepts are of analytic utility; that they therefore merit studying in their own right; and that the relationship between frames and ideology needs to be explored and elaborated as well. However, we differ, it appears, is in our respective conceptualizations of ideology and of the relationship between framing and ideology. We sketch our view of that relationship and argue, as well, that Oliver and Johnston have misunderstood aspects of our work on frames and framing processes and have ignored issues within the voluminous literature on ideology that, in the absence of further elaboration and clarification, undermine the utility of their take on ideology and its relationship to social movements and related processes. These differences and concerns notwithstanding, we suggest that Oliver and Johnston's essay functions usefully to focus attention on an important and neglected issue in the study of social movements.

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During the decade of the 1990s the evolving framing perspective on social movements has found its way into an increasing amount of conceptual and empirical scholarship on social movements, so much so, in fact, that there has been an almost meteoric acceleration in the number of articles, chapters, and papers invoking the frame concept or referring to framing processes in some fashion or another (Benford and Snow 2000). Presumably one reason for this escalating use of the framing perspective among social movement scholars is that it helps fill a conceptual void and thereby provides analytic purchase on understanding the interpretive work engaged in by movement actors and others within the movement field of action. Yet, as with any perspective, and particularly evolving ones, there are various glosses, untidy linkages, and misunderstandings that reveal themselves in both the application of the perspective and in its critical assessment. So it is not surprising that various issues with and questions about the movement framing perspective have been raised (e.g., Benford 1997; Fisher 1997; Hart 1996; Jasper 1997), issues and questions that one critic cleverly suggested constitute “cracks in the frame” (Steinberg 1998: 847). Oliver and Johnston’s essay contributes to this line of critique by zeroing in on one of the “cracks”: the glossing of ideology and its relationship to frames. Their basic concern, as they state in no uncertain terms, is the “failure” of frame theory “to address the relation between frames and the much older, more political concept of ideology, and the concomitant tendency of many researchers to use ‘frame’ uncritically as a synonym for ideology.”

We agree with the core contention that the relationship between frames and ideology has been glossed over, and thus would like to take this opportunity to sketch our understanding of

that relationship. Before doing so, however, we want to address and clarify a number of fundamental misunderstandings and misrepresentations that appear throughout Oliver and Johnston's essay.

### **Misunderstandings and Misrepresentations**

The first misunderstanding, which can also be construed as a misrepresentation, flows from Oliver and Johnson's orienting contention regarding "the tendency of many researchers to use 'frame' uncritically as a synonym for ideology." Referring to us, they charge that we "neither provide justification for abandoning the term ideology and substituting frame...." This was news to us, since we never recommended in any of our writings that the term ideology should be jettisoned or replaced by the term frame. In fact, we began our 1986 article by incorporating ideology into our conceptualization of frame alignment: "By frame alignment, we refer to the linkage of individual and SMO interpretive orientations, such that some set of individual interests, values and beliefs and SMO activities, goals, and ideology are congruent and complementary" (Snow, Rochford, Worden, and Benford 1986: 464). And in several subsequent conceptual works (Snow and Benford 1988, 1992), we not only refer to ideology, but we draw on the discourses on ideology of Geertz (1973), Gramsci (1971), and Rudé (1980). Although we do not elaborate the implied relationship between ideology and framing processes and frames in any of these works, and thus stand guilty of glossing over that relationship, that is not the same as calling for the abandonment of the concept of ideology. Furthermore, if there are other scholars who have made such a call, we are not familiar with their work and, more importantly, Oliver and Johnston do not reference them. Thus, it appears that they are guilty of creating a red herring of sorts by making an unsubstantiated inference.

The second misunderstanding flows from the authors' decision, whether unwitting or intentional, to frame the critique in terms of the noun "frame" rather than in terms of the verb "framing," and thereby accent the constructed product over framing as a set of dynamic, negotiated, and often contested processes. Although they acknowledge the latter, their critique is clearly anchored in the former, thus misrepresenting what we regard the cornerstone of the framing perspective. As we emphasized in the introduction to the 1988 article, our primary interest was in moving beyond the "description of movement ideology" (p. 197) and the corollary tendency to "treat meanings or ideas as given, as if there is an isomorphic relationship between the nature of any particular set of conditions or events and the meanings attached to them" (p. 198), to the analytical tasks of examining the "production of meaning"—in other words the "signifying work" we referred to as "*framing*" (p. 198). Our focus in that article, was not, as Oliver and Johnston suggest, to "rename" the ideology literature in frame analytic terms; rather we sought to specify the relationship between belief systems and framing activities – for example, how various characteristics of belief systems constrain the production of meaning and thus can affect the mobilizing potency of framings. Our focus on the core framing tasks was not simply a case of pouring Wilson's (1973) older wine into new bottles. Instead, we sought to bring some dynamism to a rather static conceptualization of ideology. Granted we refer to Wilson's three components of ideology as "core framing tasks." But we then show how these three component elements are socially constructed via various articulative, punctuating, and attributional processes (which we elaborated in 1992). In short, our objective was to attempt to specify the interactive processes by which frames are socially constructed, sustained, contested, and altered, the phenomenological and infrastructural constraints on those processes, and the consequences of these processes for

aspects of mobilization. But most of this, which we regard as the heart of the framing perspective, is given short shrift by Oliver and Johnston.

The third misunderstanding is the authors' location of the essence of frames in cognition. As they note repeatedly, "frames are individual cognitive structures," they are "mental structures or schemata....," they point to "a cognitive process wherein people bring to bear background knowledge to interpret an event or circumstance and to locate it in a larger system of meaning." Certainly collective action frames are, in part, cognitive entities that aid interpretation and social action, but their essence, sociologically, resides in situated social interaction, that is in the interpretive discussions and debates that social movement actors engage in amongst each other and in the framing contests that occur between movement actors and other parties within the movement field of action, such as countermovements, adversaries, and even the media. Collective action frames are, to borrow on the language of Bakhtin and his circle, "dialogical" phenomenon; their essence resides "not within us, but between us" (Medvedev and Bakhtin 1978: 8; Todorov 1984).<sup>1</sup> And it is this understanding of frames as the products of the interindividual, interactional, and contested process of framing that is glossed over by Oliver and Johnston.

It is perhaps because of this glossing of framing processes that a fourth misunderstanding arises: the contention that "frame theory is inadequate...for describing what happens in the process of ideological change." We find this charge particularly puzzling inasmuch as we think that this is one area in which the framing perspective clearly provides analytic leverage. Specifically, we contend, as we will elaborate shortly, that collective action frames can function to amplify and extend existing ideologies or provide innovative antidotes to them. Examples are plentiful, including those which Oliver and Johnston provide in their initial discussion of the pro-

choice and pro-life movements, and in Berbrier's (1998) analysis of the transformation or re-framing of traditional white supremacist rhetoric and ideology.<sup>2</sup>

The fifth misunderstanding is the authors' failure to grasp the extent to which frames and framing are embedded within social constructionist processes that involve thinking and reasoning by the parties involved. This misunderstanding, which follows understandably on the heels of the essay's focus on frames rather than on framing processes and the mis-location of the essence of frames in cognition rather than in dialogical interaction, surfaces in various questionable comments throughout the essay. One such comment contends that work on ideology is evocative of a social constructionist view that "has been missing from recent scholarship." If the reference is to the framing scholarship, which we presume is the case given the focus of the essay, we wonder how such a statement could be made unless the authors have misapprehended both the framing perspective on social movements and the broader constructionist perspective in which it is located.<sup>3</sup> Such a statement also raises questions about the authors' understanding of how the concept of ideology has been used in the earlier social movement literature. That scholars such as Heberle (1951), Turner and Killian (1957), and Wilson (1973) invoke and define the concept is clear, but how it is used analytically is more ambiguous. Our reading of this earlier literature is that it treated ideology in a highly descriptive and relatively static and non-dynamic fashion. Moreover, how it comes into existence and is appropriated by movement actors has been taken as given. Additionally, ideology has rarely been used as an important variable or determinant of the kinds of processes and outcomes that movement analysts have sought to explain. Rather, it has more commonly been invoked and described as an aspect of a movement, and then left to linger in the background as analysis of some other movement process or conundrum proceeds. If this

assessment of the use of ideology in much of the earlier movement literature is correct, where, we wonder, is the social constructionist influence? It may be asserted or implied, but it is neither analyzed nor demonstrated.

Equally curious is the authors' contention that ideology not only is predicated on thinking and reasoning, but that it "points to an element of ideation often neglected in the study of social movements: thinking." This strikes us as most puzzling in two ways. First, does it imply that thinking and reasoning are not salient aspects of framing processes? If that is the implication, then it is empirically unfounded as any firsthand, up-close examination of movement encounters and meetings suggest. And second, it injects into ideology a degree of cognitive dynamism and interactional give-and-take that seems strikingly discordant with some conceptions of ideology, such as those that emphasize its complexity and deep structure, as the authors appear to do, and those that highlight distortion, mystification, and illusion, as embodied in such corollary concepts as "false consciousness" (Marx and Engels 1989) and "hegemony" (Gramsci 1971).

A seventh misunderstanding of frames and the framing perspective is reflected in the authors' designation of the perspective as a social psychological one, and ideology as basically a political sociological designation. We would argue that such categorization is not so neat, since both frames and ideology have social psychological and political dimensions to them. In fact, we have emphasized elsewhere that framing involves the "politics of signification" and that movements function as, among other things, framing agents that "are deeply embroiled, along with the media and the state in what (has been) referred to as the 'politics of signification'" (Snow and Benford 1988: 198). If so, then what is the rationale for associating framing solely with social psychology and thereby neglecting its links to politics and particularly the often contested



character of framing processes?

Perhaps it is because of the foregoing misunderstandings and misrepresentations that Oliver and Johnston suggest “that frame alignment theory correctly captures some of the important particulars of the United States political culture in the 1990s, but is misleading...for movements in other times and places.” On what grounds and in terms of what evidence are such assertions made? Are they suggesting that social problems and grievances were so transparent in earlier periods of history and in other cultures that no interpretive work was required, and that political and economic disruptions or breakdowns were not associated with interpretative debate and conflict of the kind we have conceptualized within the framing perspective? If so, then apparently we have different historical and sociological understandings of the range of movements and revolutions that preceded the 1990s, including those that occurred in the 1960s, '70s, and '80s.

This takes us to a final issue that obfuscates Oliver and Johnston’s conception of and claims for ideology. We refer to the ambiguous character of the concept of ideology and Oliver and Johnston’s failure to come to grips with it. Their review of the history of the ideology concept correctly insinuates that it has been entangled in a web of pejorative connotations and contradictory definitions since it was first employed by the French philosopher Destutt de Tracy at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, ranging from a general and more neutral conception, as reflected in the writing of Geertz (1973), Seliger (1976), and Gouldner (1976), to a more critical conception wherein ideology is seen as functioning to sustain existing class structures and relations of domination, as reflected in the writings of Marx and Engels (1989), Mannheim (1985) and Thompson (1984). But Oliver and Johnston invite us to accept the analytic utility of their

conceptualization – “a system of meaning that couples assertions and theories about the nature of social life with values and norms relevant to promoting or resisting social change” – without reconciling it with various contradictory and problematic aspects of the above tangle of definitions, including the previously mentioned claims of distortion and mystification that attend the more critical conceptualizations. As well, they dance around some of the problematic features of their own conceptualization. For example, their conceptualization seems to assume, just as most treatments of ideology, a degree of coherence and integration among the elements of ideology (e.g., values and beliefs) that is not in accord with research on values and beliefs (Rokeach 1973; Williams 1970). The fact is that not only do individuals acknowledge a host of values and beliefs that are often contradictory, but they rarely cohere in an integrated, systematic fashion. As Williams found in his examination of values in American society, there is neither “a neatly unified ‘ethos’ or an irresistible ‘strain toward consistency’” (1970: 451). The findings of recent research on the “cultural wars” thesis in the U.S. makes this point even more empirically compelling (DiMaggio, Evans, and Bryson 1996; Davis and Robinson 1996): American political opinions, attitudes, and values do not cluster neatly or tightly together at any one ideological pole, thus suggesting that the American “public does not seem to be divided into warring camps as the culture war metaphor might suggest” (Kniss 1997: 259). And even when attention is focused at the religious conservative/orthodox or political right-wing ends of the hypothesized ideological continuum, there is greater ideological variation among the groups that fall under these categorical umbrellas than often presumed (Aho 1990; Woodberry and Smith 1998).

Insofar as values and beliefs constitute salient components of ideology, then such observations suggest that perhaps their presumed integration with respect to any particular

ideology should be problematized, such that they can range on a continuum from being tightly coupled to loosely coupled. Such a conceptualization is not only consistent with the frequent observation that movements on different sides of the political spectrum can find sustenance in the same broader cultural ideology, but it calls for an alternative concept that encompasses emergent sets of ideas and values that function either as innovative amplifications and extensions of existing ideologies or as antidotes to them. Obviously, we think the concept of collective action frames helps to fill this conceptual void. This, of course, begs the question of our understanding of the relationship between ideology and framing.

### **Linking Ideology and Frames**

Because of limited space, we briefly sketch our conceptualization of the relationship between ideology and framing by accenting several aspects of that relationship and the distinction between the two concepts. The first aspect is our view of *ideology as a cultural resource* for framing activity. Specifically, we contend that the framing process involves, among other things, the articulation and accenting or amplification of elements of events, experiences, and existing beliefs and values, most of which are associated with existing ideologies. Regarding the latter, we believe that it is arguable and empirically demonstratable that collective action frames are typically comprised, at least in part, of strands of one or more ideologies. If so, then collective action frames are rooted, in varying degrees, in extant ideologies, but are neither determined by nor isomorphic with them.<sup>4</sup> Instead, from a framing perspective, ideologies constitute cultural resources that can be tapped and exploited for the purpose of constructing collective action frames, and thus function simultaneously to facilitate and constrain framing processes (Benford and Snow 2000; Snow and Benford 1988). Following Swidler (1986), we are arguing that if

culture is best conceived as a “bag of tools,” then clearly ideologies function in this fashion in relation to collective action frames. As well, extant ideologies, or aspects of them, can function as points of contention to which collective action frames are developed and proffered as antidotes or emergent counter-ideologies.

A second aspect of our view of the relationship between ideology and framing that we want to emphasize is that framing may also function as *remedial ideological work*. By that we mean that framing provides a conceptual handle for thinking about and analyzing the not infrequent remedial, reconstitutive work that is required when members of any ideological or thought community encounter glaring disjunctions between their beliefs and experiences or events in the world. It was this very dilemma that was the basis for Berger’s analysis of the remedial “ideological work” that rural communards in upstate California engaged in so as to “maintain some semblance of consistency, coherence, and continuity” between their beliefs and actions when circumstances rendered them contradictory (1981: 22). Such remedial discourse or ideological work is likely to be precipitated or called forth by a number of disjunctive occurrences, such as (a) when beliefs and events in the world are discordant, (b) when beliefs and behavior or outcomes contradict each other, and (c) when the existence of competing or conflicting beliefs within a group threatens its coherence and increases the prospect of schism or factionalization. What is called for in each of these situations is a re-framing, or “keying” in Goffman’s words (1974), of the tear or rip in the ideology, a stitching together of the disjunctions.

A third aspect of the relationship between ideology and framing that warrants mention is that *framing mutes the vulnerability of ideology to reification*. As we have noted, the language of framing directs attention to the processes through which interpretive orientations develop,

evolve, and change, and thereby triggers warning signals about the prospects of reifying existing ideologies or the products of framing activity, such as emergent ideologies and master frames. The tendency to reify movement ideologies or mobilizing beliefs and ideas, as well as master frames, has been particularly prominent in the social movement literature. The concept of framing functions as an antidote to that tendency because framing is a social activity and accomplishment.

This takes us to the final aspect of the relationship between ideology and framing that we want to highlight: *framing, in contrast to ideology, is a more readily empirically observable activity*. It is one of the things that we have repeatedly observed social movement actors doing over and over again during the course of their conversations and debates in the context of movement meetings and activities. And what makes framing empirically observable, as we emphasized earlier, is that neither frames nor framing processes are purely or merely mentalistic or cognitive entities. Instead, they are rooted in and constituted by group-based social interaction, which is readily available for first-hand observation, examination, and analysis. That too few movement scholars have made actual framing activity the focus of empirical inquiry is no reason to gloss over this characteristic interactive, constructionist feature of framing.

### **Summary**

Based on the foregoing observations and arguments, it should be clear that we agree with Oliver and Johnston (1) that frames and ideology are not different words for the same thing but are, in fact, different entities; (2) that both concepts are of analytic utility; (3) that they therefore merit studying in their own right; and (4) that the relationship between frames and ideology needs to be explored and elaborated as well. Where we differ, it seems, is in our respective conceptualizations of ideology and of the relationship between ideology and framing. As well, we

have argued that Oliver and Johnston have misunderstood or misrepresented aspects of our work on frames and framing processes and have ignored issues within the voluminous literature on ideology that, in the absence of further elaboration and clarification, undermine the utility of their take on ideology and its relationship to social movements and related processes. These concerns and unresolved issues notwithstanding, Oliver and Johnston's essay has functioned usefully to focus attention on an important and neglected issue in the study of social movements.

## ENDNOTES

1. We are indebted to Steinberg (1998) for bringing to our attention the connection between Bakhtin's work, particularly his conception of the dialogic, and framing processes.
2. Interestingly, such observations raise questions about Oliver and Johnston's corollary assertion that "'frame transformation' is really 'ideological transformation.'" Such a contention strikes us as premature in that it is open to both empirical investigation and conceptual clarification. After all, it seems reasonable to argue that there are both frame transformations and ideological transformations, and that sometimes they are interconnected and sometimes they occur independent of each other. Hence, the importance of specifying the conditions under which they may be causally connected before asserting that one is really the other.
3. While we regard framing perspective as a variant of the broader social constructionist perspective, we situate it, or at least our work on framing, toward the constrained, contextual end of the constructionist continuum. See Benford and Snow (2000) for a discussion of how framing processes are affected by various elements of the sociocultural context in which they are embedded.
4. For a recent elaboration of this argument, see Snow's (2000) discussion of the relationship between ideology and framing processes in the context of Islamic social movements.

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